***Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Intellectual Interactions in Early Modern South Asia*. By Shankar Nair. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020. xiv + 259 pp. $34.95 (paperback). ISBN: 9780520345683 (paperback)**

Shankar Nair's monograph on Hindu-Muslim intellectual life in early modern South Asia draws from discourses in multiple languages (Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic) and belonging to differing religious and philosophical traditions. These traditions, inter alia, include Islamic philosophical schools of thought from the Peripatetic (*mashshā'ī*; for example, Avicenna/Ibn Sīnā [d. 1037] and his later commentators) to the *wujūdī* (for example., Ibn al-ʿArabī [d. 1240] and his later interpreters) and Hindu philosophical traditions such as Advaita Vedānta in its internal diversity. These traditions come together in Nair's careful and skillful analysis of the Sanskrit *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* and its 1597 Persian translation, the *Jūg Bāsisht*.

Of interest to scholars of interreligious studies, so often focused on contemporary relations among religious traditions and their communities, is the fact that the *Jūg Bāsisht* was translated in the late 16th century by a Hindu-Muslim team of scholars working together to craft "a novel vocabulary with which to express Hindu Sanskrit philosophical ideas in an Islamic Persian idiom" (1). Nair demonstrates how the confluence of Hindu Sanskrit and Islamic Persian and Arabic traditions come together in the context of the Mughal "translation movement"—using this particular text as a case study—to produce something new: "a cosmopolitan, interreligious lexicon in the Persian language" (2). Even though funding of such projects may have been instigated for the sake of Mughal political legitimation and imperial self-promotion (similar to the Abbasid Graeco-Arabic translation movement that took place some 700 years earlier in a different context), on the ground, as it were, intellectual traditions came together in creative ways through this interreligious, cross-philosophical dialogue among living Hindu and Muslim scholars, each with their own set of religious and philosophical principles, genealogies, and practices. Besides, in the 21st century, state, governmental, academic institutional, and even corporate support for interreligious or intercultural dialogue (or "diversity") does not take away from the intellectual labor and creativity required to put various traditions and communities into conversation with each other.

Scholars familiar with Advaita Vedānta and the *wujūdī* School of Ibn al-ʿArabī (that is, the tradition that variously argues for *waḥdat al-wujūd*, or "unity of being/existence") often find these two traditions to be amenable to each other, as if they are just saying "the same thing in a different language." However, Nair implicitly demonstrates that this presupposition is grounded in a false sense of similarity. Even if true (it may be, it may not—it is unarguable), the condition for the possibility of *even asserting* such discursive claims demanded a long history of intellectual effort and heavy lifting that brought these disparate discourses together. In the 16th- and 17th-century context, it was not obvious that Islamic Arabo-Persian and Hindu Sanskrit philosophical ideas were even capable of conversing with each other. Nair renders this apparent to readers:

> What the translation team had inherited…were two historically distinct intellectual traditions whose basic scholarly terms, categories, discursive patterns, and intellectual habits had long since been entrenched, along with all the erudite inscrutability that accompanies centuries of concerted refinement, contention, and debate over well-trodden, discipline-specific questions and academic minutiae (2).

Accordingly, it was *not at all* obvious how these two traditions could "speak" to each other in the translation of the Sanskrit *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* into the Persian *Jūg Bāsisht*—much less claim philosophical equivalence. Furthermore, "both the Arabo-Persian and Sanskrit philosophical traditions…exhibited an overwhelming historical propensity to utterly ignore, if not actively disdain, one another" (2).

Nair therefore tackles the question: how did the Hindu-Muslim translation team—to use more contemporary parlance (that Nair does not use)—get over their differences and find common ground? What were the translation strategies? What aspects of their philosophical genealogies enabled them to find a new vocabulary? What slowed them down? What details were lost from the *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* when translated into the Persian *Jūg Bāsisht*? How might this loss have been justified? How did their expected audience shape their choices? While Nair is not a scholar of interreligious studies, his work speaks to the field in urgent ways:

> Given the increasingly strident religious conflicts, nationalisms, and identity politics that we face in our present day—not only within South Asia, but globally—I would suggest that there is much to learn, both within the academic study of religion and also in our broader public discourse, from this historical case study of dialogue-fashioning between two religious civilizations (3).

This is precisely why Nair's monograph is so important for the field of interreligious studies, in my view. He engages in careful, critical reading of textual traditions, attending to linguistic nuances in multiple languages, philosophical minutiae across two religious traditions and several philosophical discourses, analyzing the translation choices so that the translation team's "theory of translation" can be reconstructed.

All of this may not be of immediate interest to interreligious studies scholars uninitiated in the rich and complex Hindu and Islamic traditions in question. However, these same scholars will find great value and constructive insight in his conclusions around how the team successfully brought these intellectual traditions into "synthetic 'dialogue' with one another" (29) and what lessons can be learned for cross-cultural dialogue today, in particular interreligious dialogue. Additionally, Nair brings his study into conversation with the implicit mission, methods, and theories of the academic study of religion, which despite efforts to decolonize itself, is still "only willing or able to entertain that such philosophers [such as the translation team and their sources] are merely articulating something real *for them* or relative to *their* particular cultural/social/political/ideological system or context" and therefore fails "to really take these figures seriously" (181). In other words, they are ever only "data" to be critically studied and never sources of theories and methods for the larger field today. Nair demonstrates from his case study of the Sanskrit *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* and its 1597 Persian translation, the *Jūg Bāsisht*, that Hindu and Muslim scholars effectively fashioned a new interdisciplinary and interreligious language, each taking each other seriously (172ff)—something severely lacking in the academic study of religion (though change is occurring in adjacent disciplines of comparative theology, intercultural or interreligious theology, Theology Without Walls, and of course interreligious studies).

Given this, the remainder of this review will not attend directly to the inner details of Nair's commendable method and innovative approach to studying the texts, authors, and

translators in question aside from mentioning a few key takeaways for scholars of interreligious studies and its related fields (such as comparative theology).

Nair must contend with the biographical lacuna regarding the translation team who worked on the Persian *Jūg Bāsisht*, which consisted of the Muslim Pānīpatī and the Hindus Jagannātha Miśra and Paṭhān Miśra: aside from these names and the works they left behind, little else is known. Rather than give more abstract, ahistorical background to their intellectual contexts, such as focusing on the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya (fl. 8th–9th cen.) or the *waḥdat al-wujūd* of Ibn al-ʿArabī (who never even used the phrase), Nair contextualizes the authors by placing them in conversation with the intra-Hindu and intra-Islamic philosophical currents contemporary to the Persian translation team. To that end, he introduces the corpora of the Hindu Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (fl. ca. 1600) and the Muslims Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī (d. 1648) and Mīr Findiriskī (d. 1641). Nair thus privileges an emic reconstruction of the philosophical currents of the time and offers their own "theology of religions" (my phrase, drawn from the Christian discipline that seeks to understand the veridical and soteriological place of other religious traditions in relationship to Christian revelation) and "their own methodologies for how multiple…'religions' could be studied comparatively" (12).

In expositing the intellectual currents of these three contemporaneous authors, Nair reconstructs the Islamic Arabic and Persian and Hindu Sanskrit traditions circulating at the time of the translation. He proposes a creative analogy to understand the Mughal 'ecosystem' of various intellectual cultures: jet streams (23ff). The analogy serves to underscore how these various intellectual discourses had structural integrity in themselves while also being influenced, like jet streams, by other environmental factors (such as political, economic, and/or social forces). The internal complexity of an atmospheric jet stream is analogous to the internal diversity and complexity of each discursive tradition; the length traveled by a jet stream is analogous to the extent of influence each tradition had on the global Hindu and Islamic traditions. Furthermore, when two or more jet streams interact, new currents or wisps may emerge; the original jet streams keep their structural integrity, but their internal complexity and diversity is likewise now modified. In other words, the confluence of these jet streams produced something new, an interreligious lexicon in the Persian language; furthermore, it shaped the original jet streams in innovative ways. Scholars who study the interreligious, inter-cultural, and/or inter-civilizational history of ideas in comparative theological or philosophical inflection will find this analogy eminently useful in other contexts.

To this end, Nair spends Chapter 1 introducing the content and context of the Sanskrit *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* and its Persian translation, the *Jūg Bāsisht*. Chapter 2 is an exposition of the life and thought of the Hindu philosopher Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, whose contributions found their way into the Persian translation in question. This chapter is a detailed explication of the internal debates found within the Hindu philosophical jet stream, particularly regarding the relationship of the phenomenal world to a creator or to our own perceptions and ignorance. Here, Nair demonstrates his intelligence and proficiency in the minutiae of Advaita Vedānta thought. Chapter 3 then turns to the Muslim Chishtī Sufi thinker Muḥibb Allāh Ilāhābādī, who represents the jet stream of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the philosophical Sufism that was very popular not only among scholars but also in the imperial courts of Shāh Jahān and Prince Dārā Shikōh. Muḥibb Allāh's thought is the discursive tradition most contemporaneous and central to the Persian translation, the *Jūg Bāsisht*, even if his ideas did not directly enter the final product.

Muḥibb Allāh's conceptualization of religious diversity (his "theology of religions") also helps understand how the translation team engaged "Indian religion" in the *Jūg Bāsisht*. Chapter 4 takes up the Iranian Muslim philosopher Mīr Findiriskī, whose œuvre represents the *mashshā'ī*, or Islamic Peripatetic philosophical jet stream that interacted with the *Jūg Bāsisht.* He traveled to South Asia and even wrote a Persian commentary on the *Jūg Bāsisht* in which he draws equivalences between certain Hindu philosophical and Islamic Peripatetic concepts. He is thus an example of how "wisps" of the translation team's jet stream made its way beyond the borders of South Asia.

Chapter 5 returns to the Persian *Jūg Bāsisht*. The reader, now sufficiently inculcated with the philosophical ideas most relevant to the *Jūg Bāsisht*, learns how the various jet streams came together in a sort of "confluence of traditions" (the title of the chapter) to produce something new. The internal diversity and contemporary discussions constituting the Arabo-Persian jet streams of Islamic philosophical Sufism and Peripatetic philosophy meet the Hindu metaphysical foundations of contemporary Advaita Vedānta thought. The two *paṇḍit*s on the team, Jagannātha Miśra and Paṭhān Miśra, contributed to the Persian *Jug Bāsisht* by interpreting and translating particular passages of the Sanskrit *Laghu-Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* "in a way that reflects…how contemporary Advaitins understood the text at that time" (143). Nair's critical reading and comparison of the translation with the original reveals something far more complex than an encounter between Sufism and Vedānta thought in the Mughal court, which is typically how secondary scholarship has described this historical context (and which Nair's monograph is challenging):

> Rather, intellectual traditions ranging from Advaita Vedānta, Śaiva non-dualism, and Yogācāra Buddhism on the Sanskrit side—not to mention the *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha* itself, representing its own peculiar philosophical synthesis—to *waḥdat al-wujūd*, Peripatetic philosophy, and Sufi poetic wisdom on the Arabo-Persian side—along with traces of, for instance, *ishrāqī* Illuminationist thought—are all participants in the particular confluence of traditions on display here (166).

Nair demonstrates just how much work needs to be done in the field of South Asian intellectual history in order to better understand the complexity of jet streams shaping various philosophical traditions.

Scholars of interreligious studies—from historical to contemporary contexts, from the theological to the sociological disciplines, and more—can learn from the careful attention to minutiae exemplified by Nair's study. His conclusion, in particular, offers sharp insights and lessons for the Euro-American academy, too. In the early modern South Asian context, the Arabic and Sanskrit traditions had already developed such an impenetrably rich and complex set of ideas and vocabulary that inter-traditional (i.e., perhaps interreligious or intercultural) conversation proved impossible; furthermore, members of each tradition often considered their own discourses sufficient unto themselves, "which means that engaging a 'foreign' intellectual tradition would serve, according to most thinkers, at best a secondary or supplemental philosophical purpose" (169). And yet, the Persian intellectual tradition and language was relatively nascent and malleable enough to accommodate a novel, interreligious lexicon (170ff). Nair argues that this is precisely why the language was chosen: it was malleable, pan-imperial, and relatively neutral in terms of "who" the language belonged to (it was not a "sacred language," as Arabic and Sanskrit are often characterized).

Contemporary departments and disciplines of philosophy, theology, and the study of religion often still function in this siloed, Euro-American-centric way, despite their best efforts to diversify and decolonize. Nair offers insightful conclusions to his study in which he applies the lessons from history to possibilities for new theories and methods—I would say aims and goals—for the related Euro-American disciplines of philosophy, theology, and the study of religion (175–186).

Nair focuses on the last of these three disciplines, but it is simple enough to make the same case of the first two, mutatis mutandis. On the study of religion, he engages very recent scholarship on the role and purpose, including theories and methods, in the study of religion to make a case for "taking religion seriously" not merely in the style of critical religion (à la Russell McCutcheon, Bruce Lincoln, and Aaron Hughes—whom Nair admits have provided great insight) but rather in a way that allows the likes of a Madhusūdana, Muḥibb Allāh, and Mīr Findiriskī, or the translation team, "to…find themselves on the 'theory' side of the enterprise" (178). That is, these discourses are not just objects of study for the scholar of religion (say, according to critical religion), but should be sources of new theories and methods in the study of religion.

> [R]ather than rejecting out of hand the idea that there is something to learn from such historical precedents [as the case study of the *Jūg Bāsight*], I would encourage the study of religion today, bearing [in mind] the admonitions [Nair details in this section], to be willing to try to think *with* (rather than simple *about*) this historical case study of encounter between two disparate religio-philosophical traditions. In order to facilitate similar cross-civilizational learning within the contemporary academy, we would do well to reflect on the processes through which the translation team found the words and the means to put their respective intellectual traditions into a certain conversation with one another (182–183).

It is easy to see how departments of philosophy and theology in the Western academy likewise ignore non-Western or non-Christian jet streams for reasons perhaps similar to why the Arabic and Sanskrit jet streams struggled to interact: each discursive tradition, despite its inherent syncretism, has a rich history, too many sources to engage already, their languages too mired in historical etymologies and genealogies, "scholarly terms, categories, discursive patterns, and intellectual habits had long since been entrenched." (2) So, what's the point? Why bring in a Ruist philosopher, or a Buddhist philosopher, or a Hindu theologian, or a Yoruba scholar-practitioner, or a Nishnaabeg academic, or a Muslima theologian, into a Western department of religion, philosophy, or theology for the *express purpose* of contributing non-Western theories and methods to the study of religion, or non-Christian aims, criteria, and ideas to Christian theology and philosophy? The assumption is that these non-Western and/or non-Christian traditions are too "set apart" (sacred?) from the Western and Christian traditions, vice versa, or both. These traditions can never meet and make sense of each other anyway (this assumption itself is either an explicit or implicit capitulation to postliberal theology's assertion that religious or cultural traditions and their accompanying practices, grammar, and logics are impenetrable and incomprehensible to each other).

But the translation team proved otherwise (as do many other confluences from other historical and intellectual contexts). And, likewise, there are instances today that prove otherwise; here, I commend the recent work by Muhammad Faruque entitled *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing*.[1] Of course, the discipline of comparative theology (and its siblings, such as interreligious or intercultural theology and Theology Without Walls) is likewise striving to prove otherwise, and Nair gives a nod to this:

> [If not the study of religion,] perhaps theology would be a more hospitable disciplinary home for such developments to take place: I would certainly welcome the development if insights from this study might take on a life within the realm of theological inquiries, though I must leave such explorations to other scholars better trained within that discipline (183).

Indeed, this reviewer—primarily a comparative theologian—has found Nair's work to be eminently beneficial for various exercises in comparative theology. But Nair is not a theologian, and so he ends the book with major takeaways "in pursuit of a method for forging our own cross-civilizational conversations in the study of religion today" (183ff).

This book, while of course a resource for scholars of religion and scholars of South Asian intellectual history—from the Hindu to the Islamic, from the Arabic and Persian to the Sanskrit—can likewise be read by scholars of interreligious studies, comparative theologians, and their adjacent disciplines. It is an excellent example of how we can learn from the historical interactions among religious traditions to craft novel theories and methods—and, if one is so inclined, theologies—related to the study of interreligious engagement.

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[1] For a review, see Axel Takacs, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 33, no. 3, pp. 313-320.